

2006 Hine Fellow, Amara Hark-Weber, who worked with the non-governmental organization Schedia based in Athens, has written a personal essay reflecting on her ten months in Greece.

Working in Elefsina as a Hine Fellow with Schedia introduced me to a Greece that few foreigners see. On the days that I was not working with the children at the Elele Center, I explored immigrant communities in Athens and worked on several documentary projects related to the social changes taking place in Greek society.

As a frontier state in the European Union, Greece receives tens of thousands of migrants annually from Eastern Europe, the Middle East, South Asia, and Africa. While some of these individuals continue their migration into Western Europe, many stay in Greece and attempt to build a new life there. Although exact numbers are difficult to come by, some estimates claim that one quarter of the total population in Athens is foreign born. In a country of fewer than 14 million people, these new residents create ripples that are felt throughout the nation.

The largest of my secondary projects concerned African migrants, many of whom were undocumented. I began this work when I found myself living in the heart of the Ghanaian community in Athens. Having spent the previous summer in Ghana, I was surprised to find a community in which I immediately felt at home. By networking with migrants who had come to Greece from throughout West Africa, I formally and informally interviewed thirty people about their experiences in Greece and their dreams for the future.

This was a difficult project to undertake. The African communities in Athens are highly ghettoized, and extremely vulnerable. People are wary of sharing their experiences and views with outsiders. I began this project hoping to record interviews to edit into an audio piece, but this became almost impossible as most of the individuals did not want their voices recorded. I then tried to do a photo project, with the hope of making portraits that the participants could send home to their families. This idea was also met with great suspicion. However, I continued to interview people and record my observations.

Ultimately, I wrote a personal essay that was as much about the process of working on my project as it was about the African migrants themselves (who agreed to be included if their names and identities were not revealed.) The essay documents only a

few of the experiences I had and a handful of the many individuals I came to know, but I hope it accomplishes my goal in writing it, to respectfully communicate the hopes and ambitions that we all share.

An excerpt from

**Tasting Salt Water:
Portraits of Young People in Transit**

Amara Hark-Weber

The streets leading away from Omonia Square are dense in every direction with people and things and traffic and congestion of all kinds. The gutters overflow with rubbish, the sidewalks are too narrow to walk on. This is where the action takes place. This place to the side, where patience and speed collide in frustration, where some people stand for hours waiting, and others push and push until they get through. This is the place where everything is imported, and everyone needs something—everyone is lacking something, everyone wants something more. Enormous boxes roll by on carts. Men with bulging bags go by. Cars arrive empty and leave full, windows nearly blocked with boxes and bags and colored plastic wrapping. These cars leave for the countryside. These bags and boxes travel toward someone's home, where their contents will be repacked and resold. On other streets, to other people.

There is one particular corner where men stand and stand and stand. Sometimes there are hundreds of them, sometimes only tens. Hey Baby, they call to me in English. *Moru Mou*, they call in Greek. I pass this corner many times a week, and always, my neck hairs stand up. I know that nothing bad will happen. I know that I am safe. Even so, the energy there is hungry. Each time I pass, I try not to look around, but I can't help it. My eyes are as hungry as everyone else's. I see twenty men holding tall stacks of phone cards; their hands are rough and misshapen. I see heaps of clothing waiting to be bought and worn. I see packages of drugs being bought and sold, clear colorful bags of vegetables resting on the pavement. I see men standing about waiting, talking, shaking hands, looking. When I pass in the afternoon, sharp shafts of white light illuminate a corridor from a dream. The faces that approach are in shadow; their dark hair glows golden like halos. On one side of this corner, in deep stairwells, junkies move jerkily as they shoot or snort or smoke. At another corner, Roma women with golden teeth, golden jewelry, flowing skirts, and dusty hair sit selling produce. Their voices shock me in their power and rawness. Their faces are creased with desperation and strength.

The first time I navigated this corner, I asked my friend, what was happening. Was it a festival? Was it the place where people waited for day jobs? I couldn't understand why so many people were crowded into this place. No, I was told, it is always like this. Later I

learn that this is where Bennington buys mobile phones to export to Ghana, and where Mohammad buys telephone cards so he can call Sierra Leone for cheap. It is the place for communication. It is the place for finding what's needed, whatever that is. Everyone who passes through is pulling their past behind them, leaving an almost visible trail of emotion and dream and hope.

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I always meet Mohammed at Victoria Station. Sometimes I am late, sometimes he is. He wears the same thing, a green hooded sweatshirt, loose-fitting blue jeans, and bright red running shoes. He is small and slim and dark, moving through the streets like water, gliding easily across uneven pavement. He watches my feet when we walk together, pointing out any bump in the sidewalk. At a particularly busy intersection he takes my hand to make sure that I am crossing safely with him and then drops it softly when we reach the other side.

Mohammed is twenty-two years old but looks at least ten years older. His family fled the war in Sierra Leone when he was a teenager, landing in a refugee camp in Guinea. When he was twenty years old, he left his family and traveled by land to Senegal where he paid a tidy sum to stow away on a Dutch cargo ship. He landed in Turkey, where he stayed for five months before hiring a smuggler to ferry him across the sea to Greece. He has lived in Athens for two years.

Mohammed sells imitation designer handbags. Although he works for himself, he always sells with a group of six or eight other Fula men. They are from Senegal, Guinea, Mali, and Burkina Faso, but they are all Fula; they share the same mother tongue. They sell belts and suitcases and sunglasses and handbags. They hover at the edge of sidewalks, their goods stacked neatly on a white sheet. They keep an eye out for police and call down the line when one approaches. Then they pull up the corners of their sheets, and they disappear. Just like that, into the air.

Most of the men in this group live together in a large apartment close to Mohammed's small one. When I visit their home, we watch bootleg DVDs of Tupac videos as they prepare their goods for the following day. Belts are rolled into neat coils and tied carefully, handbags are sorted and stuffed. They offer me tea or coffee and gossip about each other. Ibrahim has a new girlfriend whom he just spoke with on the phone. John is saving to leave but yesterday had to send extra money home because

his cousin is in the hospital.

All of Mohammed's friends are Muslim, and they express deep concern when I say that I am not a Christian or a Muslim. Pick one, they say. Mohammed is both Christian and Muslim. He says that he prefers Christianity because there are fewer rules, but he practices Islam because it is the religion of his family. Every time that I see him, he asks me if I have made up my mind. I am still trying to decide, I say, and he nods. "I know it is difficult," he says, "but you must try. What would happen if, God forbid, a car should hit you tomorrow?" He smiles. "I know that you are very bad at crossing the streets! Think about that and inform me of your decision."

Mohammed lives in a basement apartment without windows. He explains that because of his experiences in the war, loud noises frighten him, and in this apartment he can't hear anything. When he is working outside and the police come, he retreats to his house while the others relocate. He is afraid. He says that his greatest problem is that he knows he is breaking the law by selling goods outside. He says that laws are made for a reason, and he doesn't want to break them. But there is no other way to survive in Athens. He is afraid to be thrown out Greece because he is responsible for his family at home.

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Everyday I see people I know on the street, and they say:

I'll soon be traveling.

I need to leave.

You must help me to get out.

I know that you have connections.

Call George Bush and tell him to bring his bombs and guns to Greece. This place is bad and needs to be a little destroyed.

They say:

You see how we look on the streets? Very awful. No wonder no one here respects us.

We would never look like this at home, but what can we do? Clothing is expensive.

When we sit and talk, they look at their hands and say:

I want to have children.

I want to marry.

And:

My family doesn't recognize me in photographs.

And:

Do you remember me?

Will you remember me?

I think you will forget.

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Walking home at night, everything is lamplit orange. Cars pass, lights flash, I hear the sounds of people's lives floating onto the street from open windows. Each apartment building is striking only in its similarity to the next.

On the street, young couples lean into each other as they walk towards downtown. An old man and woman in bedroom slippers carry knotted bags of rubbish to the silver dumpsters on the corner. I am on my way home, but I still feel like a transplant.

Coming toward me is a group of young African men. They walk slowly, speak softly. The night hides their features until we grow close. They are completely absorbed in each other, and I long to be in such a group. I look at them and smile, but they don't notice me.

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Sometimes we are lucky and we find someone when we need them most. Bennington and I needed to find each other. I was overwhelmed by my project and my life in Greece. Bennington was unemployed and reassessing his life and his goals. We were so similar that some days I thought we must be flip sides of the same coin. We trusted and distrusted each other in a particular way that was only possible between us, there, then.

We were similar, but our experiences were different. He thought I was living the life he was sweating for, and he wanted me to taste the sweetness of that life. He didn't understand the bitterness in my mouth. But we didn't talk about these things. They were the space between us that could not be bridged.

Now I am gone, and he is still there, in the same place. And I imagine that we swallow salt water when we think about each other. Perhaps we both knew that would happen all along.

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Thinking about this now, I remember a proverb that I read a long time ago. *Because you exist, I know that I too exist.* For that quiet moment, we lived these words. We were there, completely human and suspended in time. That is how I remember us, how I remember Athens. A quiet time. A sad place. A city where everyone is searching for someone to lean against as they look out on the stunning grayness of an ordinary day.